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RUEHAK/AMEMBASSY ANKARA PRIORITY 1388

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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 YEREVAN 001394

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [KPAO](#) [KDEM](#) [AM](#)

SUBJECT: ANOTHER BROADSIDE FROM THE PRESIDENT'S OFFICE ON  
RADIO LIBERTY

REF: YEREVAN 1353

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Classified By: CDA JOSEPH PENNINGTON FOR REASONS 1.4(B,D)

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SUMMARY  
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¶1. (C) Presidential Chief of Staff Armen Gevorkian called in CDA November 27 to renew Kocharian's visceral objections to Radio Liberty (RL) programming which, according to Gevorgian, has been "turned into a mouthpiece for (former President) Levon Ter-Petrossian (LTP) by the director of the RL Armenian Service. Gevorkian explicitly threatened to remove Radio Liberty from the airwaves in Armenia, saying "we expect the US embassy and the US Government to take steps to change this situation. If that does not happen soon, we will take our own measures." CDA reminded Gevorkian of the President's "personal commitment" to former Charge Perina and DAS Bryza that the GOAM would not interfere with RL broadcasts once they were moved to private radio. He noted that a shutdown of RL would be a grave mistake for Armenia and a serious setback in US-Armenian relations. Post believes we should act now to discourage the GOAM from giving in to its worst instincts on the RL issue (see suggested actions in paras 9 and 10). End Summary.

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DEJA VU AT THE PRESIDENCY  
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¶2. (C) Armen Gevorkian, President Kocharian's Chief of Staff, called in CDA November 27 to reiterate Kocharian's allegations that Radio Liberty's Armenia Service has become "nothing more than a campaign tool of (former President) Levon Ter-Petrossian." Gevorkian expressed his "surprise and disappointment" that there had been no change in the tenor of RL broadcasts since he first raised the issue with us on November 14. "Our leadership expects action from your side," he said. When the CDA recalled President Kocharian's repeated "personal guarantees" to former Charge Perina and DAS Bryza back in August that the GOAM would not interfere with RL once it moved to private radio, Gevorkian claimed that "the commitments went both ways," implying that the USG had undertaken to ensure a "more objective" editorial policy by RL. CDA explained that neither the embassy nor the State Department controls Radio Liberty programming, and pointed out that we had arranged for RL representatives to meet with the GOAM over the summer to discuss the Government's

objections to RL programming and editorial content.

13. (C) Gevorkian repeated his contention that "the problem" at RL is being caused by Harry Tamrazian, Director of the Armenian Service, whose longstanding ties to Ter-Petrossian, according to Gevorkian, are well known. He claimed to have "friends in Radio Liberty" who have expressed their own unhappiness with the station's editorial line and feel intimidated from producing more "objective" coverage.

Gevorkian decried RL's "obsessive focus on Ter-Petrossian," when, he claimed, the former President is running a distant fourth or fifth place in most opinion polls. Gevorkian alleged that, on a weekly RL program that affords ordinary Armenians the chance to express their views, "8 in 10 say they support Ter-Petrossian." "How is this possible," he asked, "when he has just 2 percent support in the country?"

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LTP SHUT DOWN RL -- NOW HE MAY HAVE TO REOPEN IT  
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14. (C) Gevorkian renewed his threat, this time more directly, to remove Radio Liberty from Armenia's airwaves. Recalling that it had been LTP who had closed down Radio Liberty during his tenure as President, Gevorkian blustered that "maybe he will have to re-open it this time" if he were to win the presidency in February. CDA cautioned that, whatever objections Kocharian or others in the GOAM may have to RL broadcasts, shutting the station down would have a disastrous impact on Armenia's image in Washington and other western capitals, and would be a huge black mark on the upcoming election process. Gevorkian responded that Armenia "is fully committed to a process that meets international standards," but noted that there are "mechanisms that can be used" to deal with RL.

15. (C) When CDA raised our concerns about the lack of

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opposition voices on other broadcast media in Armenia, Gevorkian pushed back. "There have been 86 opposition members and their supporters on Armenian TV this month alone," he said, "and not a day goes by without the opposition being heard on television." (Comment: A report released last week by a local media watchdog tells a different story. The report noted a dramatic increase in negative stories about LTP since he announced his candidacy, and a strong positive bias for PM Sargsian. Moreover, we have observed a GOAM strategy to spotlight and even bolster (politically impotent) non-LTP opposition voices in order to keep the opposition divided and to misdirect outside observers. End Comment.) He alleged that LTP and his surrogates have been invited to appear on political talk shows by four Armenian TV stations, but have declined each time. "They prefer to go on Radio Liberty," he claimed, "because Radio Liberty will do what they tell them." Gevorkian said that while he and President Kocharian understand that RL doesn't necessarily reflect the views of the US Government, "ordinary Armenians believe it does." Consequently, the argument went, those who listen to RL believe the US supports LTP.

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WE EXPECT YOU TO CHANGE THIS SITUATION  
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16. (C) Gevorkian closed by saying Kocharian "doesn't want to have to write a letter to the US Congress or to the head of Radio Liberty" to effect a change in RL programming. "We expect the US Embassy and the US Government to change this situation." CDA replied that we would (again) pass along the President's concerns to RFE/RL, but were not in a position to influence the content of RL programs. He again urged that the GOAM consider carefully the potential repercussions before making any moves against Radio Liberty.

17. (SBU) Post understands that RFE/RL will soon send one of its managers to Yerevan to look into the situation on the ground. Post encourages the visiting RFE/RL official to meet with emboffs, relevant GOAM officials, and independent media outlets in Yerevan to obtain a broad spectrum of views about RL Armenia Service programming. Meeting Gevorkian personally would be a welcome demonstration of good faith that RFE/RL is willing to hear him out about the president's objections, as well as a chance to rebut the allegations.

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THE NEED FOR ACTION  
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8 (C) COMMENT: Some of Gevorkian's arguments may not be entirely without merit, and we have heard reports of disagreement within the RL Armenia Service about the Service's editorials. Since Gevorkian's first intervention (reftel), we have gone back through a number of recorded RL programs. From the still-limited sample our staff has reviewed, we too are somewhat surprised by the extent of what might be considered pro-LTP coverage. While we therefore have some concerns about RL Armenia Service's editorial judgment, we are nonetheless fully convinced of the need to fight on Radio Liberty's behalf against government efforts to suppress it. Unlike the more oblique attack the GOAM directed against RL this past summer -- shifting the broadcasts from public to private radio channels -- this latest challenge is a frontal attack that should be answered firmly and directly. This threat against RL may also be a way for the GOAM to test US resolve in the continued absence of a permanent US ambassador at post. Our defense should be robust. At the same time, we want to avoid creating a GOAM perception that the US has become a political partisan in direct opposition to the ruling party. Therefore, we ask RFE/RL to ensure that its Armenia Service is setting an example of objectivity for its Armenian listeners.

19. (C) Action Proposal: Post proposes the following steps:

-- CDA has already requested a meeting with PM Sargsian to discuss this issue (along with several other democracy-related concerns) and lay down a clear marker that shutting down Radio Liberty is unacceptable to the US, regardless of the GOAM's complaints about the content of RL

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programs.

-- Post requests that the Department consider a letter from the Secretary or another Department principal to President Kocharian reaffirming strong US support for Radio Liberty (suggested draft text in para 10).

-- Post already has plans to allocate USD 85,000 of FSA funding to advertise Radio Liberty's shift from public radio to the private radio network. CDA intends to advise the PM about this program, noting that it was conceived as a response to the switch to the private network last summer and is not a response to the government's current concerns. Our inclination is to go ahead with the advertising campaign despite the latest dust-up, but we may need to recalibrate depending on the PM's response. In any case, we do not plan to back off on the advertising absent firm assurances from the PM that RL programs will continue without interference.

-- An RFE/RL representative should meet with chief of staff Armen Gevorkian here in Yerevan as a token of serious and willingness to listen to criticism, as well as to present counter-arguments.

10. (C) SUGGESTED TEXT OF LATTER FROM SECRETARY RICE TO

PRESIDENT KOCHARIAN:

Dear Mr. President,

Our Charge d'Affaires in Yerevan, Joseph Pennington, has conveyed to me concerns raised by your administration about the editorial policies and content of Radio Liberty's Armenian language programming in Armenia, and I felt it important to respond. As you know, Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty was established by the United States Congress to provide balanced and objective news information and editorial comment, completely independent of the US Government. The Administration does not have influence over the editorial practices of RFE/RL or its subsidiaries. These news agencies operate independently under their charter, with separate funding from Congress. I want to be very clear that RFE/RL does not speak for the United States Government. Its editorial analysis and news judgment are entirely its own.

I also want to assure you that RFE/RL enjoys high respect and political support in Washington -- both in the Administration and in Congress. We stand strongly behind RFE/RL's mission and mandate to provide independent news and opinion programming in the countries it has served in with such distinction for many years. I note that the OSCE Election Observation Mission's final report on Armenia's May 2007 parliamentary election cited RFE/RL as virtually the only media outlet on Armenia's airwaves to "broadcast critical viewpoints expressed by different contestants and voters." In that context, I would note that Armenia fails the "Voice and Accountability" indicator, an independent measure of media freedom, on its 2008 MCC scorecard.

I also am mindful of your personal guarantee, conveyed to the US this past summer by our then Charge d'Affaires, Rudolf Perina, and by Deputy Assistant Secretary Matthew Bryza, that Radio Liberty would face no obstacles to its broadcasts once it was transferred from Armenian public radio to a private sector broadcaster. I understand that you personally vouched for the credibility and performance of the private broadcaster in airing an undiminished schedule of Radio Liberty programming in Armenia.

In light of all these factors, I would be greatly troubled if Radio Liberty were to lose its ability to broadcast freely in Armenia, or if those broadcasts were otherwise put in jeopardy. I look forward to an early resolution of this important issue.

(complimentary close)  
PENNINGTON